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Creators: Hafford, W. B.

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THE VALUE OF PUBLIC SPEAKING TO THE FUTURE ENGINEER

By W. B. HAFFORD.*

EVERY transaction in the field of business, whether a trifling sale or the final agreement in a million-dollar combination of interests, passes through an intensely critical stage. The outcome all depends upon how the individual expresses himself, whether in writing or in the more delicate medium of speech. A moment of reflection will surely convince one of the absolute truth of this statement. It is perfectly logical and we must come to the conclusion inevitably that anyone who expects to handle important business must prepare himself for putting his proposals at the psychological moment. It is fundamentally wrong to dream that even the most logical courses of action will win acquiescence on the soundness of the proposition alone. In order to succeed, any business man, any engineer, or any doctor, whether he wishes to or not, must be a salesman. The medium of all salesmanship is language, the signal code of the whole world.

It has been stated that thought cannot exist without words. From infancy, knowledge is acquired only by coupling sensations and objects with sounds and then words. A certain sound given by a leader in a pack of animals is significant of food, danger or what not. In reading, our thoughts are synonymous with the formation of the sounds of our minds, if not expressed out loud. Attempt to carry on a conversation with a foreigner whose words you cannot understand and you are readily convinced that the word and the thing it represents must be brought together in your mind.

There are four periods in our lives when our speech training is affected by age. These stages are (1) babyhood, until about the sixth birthday, (2) childhood, up to about twelve years of age, (3) adolescence, and (4) adulthood. Psychologists and physiologists agree that the habits fixed in babyhood are the most powerful of all. Our speech habits formed in the first stage are all important, and the factor that counts about all others is imitation. Our parents, our friends and relatives can either make or break us. Many a man has found himself afflicted with some "speech disease" contracted even at this early period. A child goes to school, and if he is pliant as most are, any advantages he may have acquired through good training in expressing himself, are soon ironed out in the leveling process of mixing with other children.

Then the child, in his struggle to find himself, in the change from childhood to manhood or womanhood, goes through another trying period, that of puberty. This period is fraught with dangers and is a time of storm and stress in his or her life. It is only a natural consequence that speech, the quintessence of bodily development, should collapse if not guarded with the most extreme care. It is to be regretted that our modern educational systems have made such little effective provision for guiding and directing the speech habits of the adolescent.

We finally come to the full grown man or woman. As this discussion is limited to engineering students, although it could be applied to any class of students, we will confine our discussion to them. Let us go to an engineering meeting, yea, to any meeting where there

are students, and listen to them stutter, talk incoherently, and mumble, and we sit back ashamed for them. How many can adequately express themselves, talk "to" the audience and not "at" it? It has been quoted, "know thyself." The engineer who has the education should know himself. Self has a very wide meaning and includes not only our individual ego, but the greater circle of surrounding things and people which act and react on us. To know ourselves we must know those great storehouses of human thought and aspirations, literature, art and music. It is essential that we be versed in the principal facts of philosophy and psychology. Every educated man should think well, write well and above all, speak well. Public speaking is an education in itself and through it we learn to know ourselves. It is a sad fact then that few engineering students do know themselves, and few of them realize that the way they talk, how they utter what they have to say, have as much to do with their getting a job as the credentials which they may have in their coat pockets. Many think that simultaneously with the thought the words will burst from their lips and that the situation will take care of itself.

Many students have the conception that verbosity is synonymous with public speaking. "Know your subject," they say. Knowing one's subject is only half the game; the method of delivery, the way you get your message across to your audience is a much more difficult matter. So many students consider public speaking as foolishness, but let them once get into the same and study its technique, and they will be quickly enlightened.

Students as well as teachers in our schools and colleges are slowly awakening to the importance of public speaking. It has been said that a number of our university presidents have been chosen more for their oratorical ability than for their knowledge or business ability. Public speaking does not necessarily mean oratory, but has a much wider scope. It includes any conversation; salesmanship; any situation where one is set apart from his hearers as the leader and it finds many applications in everyday life.

Our task then is to bring students in engineering to the point where they realize the importance not only of what they say, but how they say it. We talk twenty times to every time we write. Teachers of English and rhetoric have had practically full sway in the past and they should now be made to believe that a student may write reams of material correctly and yet be unable to talk correctly. If they talk correctly, they will write correctly.

Most of our engineering curriculums contain at least one course in which oral composition or public speaking has some part. Many require from one-half to two years of it in connection with written composition. Most contain public speaking as an elective. The problem of making it elective or compulsory has been quite freely discussed. If made elective the classes are small; if made compulsory there results a feeling of hatred for the subject. Many students take it for a "snap" course. It should be regarded in all fairness at least on a par with other subjects, such as mathematics, which is absolutely essential to the engineering profession. All students do not take mathematics because they like it.

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* Graduate Student at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. Graduate in Mechanical Engineering at the Ohio State University, 1920.

awaken to the importance of developing their expressive ability and that English teachers will come to realize that the oral composition or public speaking is more important than so much written work. Make the courses compulsory; give plenty of them. Maybe our high schools will wake up too. The world has always recognized that mastery of language gives an additional power over thoughts and actions of other men. Very few business men have ever given any systematic attention to language and its relation to success and fewer students have done so. In the first place, our language is so near to us, we fail to appreciate either the need or the difficulty of conscious control of self. The whole root of the situation is in our early training. Without it public speaking becomes an entire relearning process for an adult, a process whereby his whole mental self undergoes a transformation. He must learn to think anew on his feet. It is harder to relearn than to learn right in the first place.

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They know mathematics is absolutely necessary—why not public speaking? Grades differ practically not at all in either elective or compulsory courses, so the argument for making it elective is futile. The question which confronts us is then: Shall public speaking be made elective or compulsory?

We are arguing that engineering students do not fully realize the importance of this factor in their lives. Ambitious engineers especially, who hope to attain success in the world, should realize that what they say and how they say it may count more for their success than their technical knowledge. Recall some of the big events or questions in the history of the world and in practically every case it has been through the eloquence of some man that policies have been adopted, the public mind molded. We have the eloquence of William Pitt, Edmund Burke, Patrick Henry and Abraham Lincoln to thank for many things we enjoy today.

As was pointed out, many of us reached adulthood with serious defects in speech caused through improper training or rather a lack of training during our earlier years. Few people realize their deficiency or know the causes of it until they make a study of themselves. This is a vital part of public speaking. A man's voice may be thought of as the neck of his mental bottle or brain; what is inside doesn't count so much; no more can come out than the neck of the bottle will permit. It doesn't matter how much an engineer may know; how wise in technical knowledge he may be; how learned; how able to frame ideas into captivating written composition; he will find very much to his sorrow that when he speaks, no more can pass through than the neck of his speech-bottle will allow.

My plea is then that engineering students should